

Discourse Markers in English Writing

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Abstract

Many devices, such as reference, substitution, ellipsis, and discourse marker, contribute to a discourse's cohesion and coherence. This paper focuses on discourse markers' role in Chinese Students' English writing, analyzing the misuse and inappropriateness of discourse markers occurring to their writing, and concludes with the suggestion that discourse markers should be paid some attention when we teach writing.

Key Words: discourse markers, cohesion, coherence, inappropriateness

I. Introduction

Discourse markers --- expressions like *well, but, oh* and *y'know* --- are one set of linguistic items that function in discourses of various styles or registers. Fraser (1998: 301) calls discourse marker analysis "a growth market in linguistics." Since the late 1980's discourse markers have been studied in a variety of languages and examined in a variety of genres and interactive contexts, though many scholars do not agree on how to define them, even what to call them. Redeker (1991: 1168) calls them discourse operators and defines them as "a word or phrase, for instance, a conjunction, adverbial, comment clause, interjection that is uttered with the primary function of bringing to listener's attention a particular kind of the upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context." Schiffrin provides "an operational definition". He "define[s] discourse markers at a more theoretical level as members of a functional class of verbal and nonverbal devices which provide contextual coordinates for ongoing talk (1987: 41)." Discourse markers are "sequentially dependent elements which bracket unit of talk (Schiffrin, 1987: 31)." Fraser (1998:302) defines "a discourse marker is a lexical expression which signals the relation of either contrast (John is fat but Marry is thin), implication (John is here, so we can start the party), or elaboration (John went home. Furthermore, he took his toys) between the interpretation of S2 [S = segment] and the interpretation of S1." Discourse markers have variant degrees of semantic meaning; they are utterance-initial; and they can signal a discourse relationship or signal a writer's or a speaker's attitude.

When we are planning to write a well-organized text, cohesion and coherence must be taken into consideration. The organization of sentences of a text or a written discourse is not like putting up bricks one upon one. There exist some relations between those sentences. Halliday and Hasan have defined a text as "not just a string of sentences. It is not simply a long grammatical unit, something of the same kind as a sentence, but differing from it in size --- a sort of supersentence, a semantic unit"(1976: 291). Discourse relations are believed to transcend grammatical structure. In *Cohesion in English* (1976) Halliday and Hasan identify five main cohesive devices in English discourse: reference, substitution, ellipsis, lexical cohesion and conjunction. Conjunction, or connective element, which is what Halliday calls discourse markers, involves the use of formal markers (i.e. discourse markers) to relate sentences, clauses and paragraphs to each other. Unlike reference, substitution, and ellipsis, the use of conjunction does not instruct the reader to supply missing information either by looking for it elsewhere in the text or

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by filling structural slots. Instead, conjunction signals the way the writer wants the reader to relate what is about to be said to what has been said before.

Some discourse markers are summarized as follows:

1. Additive: and, or also, in addition, furthermore, besides, similarly, likewise, by contrast, for instance;
2. Adversative: but, yet, however, instead, on the other hand, nevertheless at any rate, as a matter of fact;
3. Causal: so, consequently, it follows, for, because, under the circumstances, for this reason;
4. Continuatives: now, of course, well, anyway, surely, after all; etc.

Apparently, conjunction is related to the entire environment of a text. The conjunctive elements (discourse markers) “presuppose the presence of other components in the discourse (Halliday, 1976: 226).” Not only giving cohesion to a text, they also cohere two sentences together.

II. Hypothesis

Judging from the work reviewed thus far, discourse markers play an important role in a text’s cohesion and coherence. We can assume that discourse markers have some relationship with a discourse’s cohesion, texture and coherence. Then we can put forward a hypothesis: in order to make their English writing more cohesive and more coherent, besides reference, substitution and ellipsis students are also very likely to use discourse markers in their essays. If this were true, teacher should be clear about how their students use discourse markers and whether they use discourse markers correctly and appropriately. Knowing that, teachers can take positive and effective steps when they teach English writing. Therefore, an experiment is needed to verify the hypothesis.

III. Description of the Experiment

1. Participants

Thirty-eight students who major in tourism management & English participated in this experiment. They are sophomores and possess a certain English proficiency to express their ideas.

2. Method

The subjects were required to write an article on the topic of How do You Think of English without limit of words. The writing was assigned as a classroom task, and the subjects did not know the purpose of this experiment. Thus we could ensure the subjects would use discourse markers as usual. After collected, a small corpus of 38 articles has been established. Then the 38 articles were examined whether discourse markers had been used in them and how many discourse markers had been used.

3. Results

The following tables reveal the results of the experiment. S stands for Subject. F refers to Frequency of discourse markers which are used in writings. T refers to the total words of every subject’s writing. The results will be demonstrated in the following appendix in much more detailed and specific.

Table 1:

S	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10
F	9	4	3	12	17	19	9	10	8	11
T	284	144	144	280	323	430	119	239	221	224

S	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
F	9	15	2	8	7	12	11	7	5	11
T	270	276	225	396	189	230	237	232	204	268

S	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
F	22	7	18	5	8	12	5	8	11	6
T	697	229	372	206	134	231	231	199	226	229

S	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38		
F	8	6	11	13	8	19	8	8		
T	241	133	206	366	209	266	203	212		

IV. Analysis of the result

The rate between the number of discourse markers and the total number of words reveals that student's English writing do abound with discourse markers. When teachers teach English writing, some of them concentrate on spelling mistakes, some on grammatical mistakes, some on writing styles, some on writing structure. In fact, discourse markers have been neglected in writing teaching, for the research on this linguistic part has been newly established.

English teachers seldom take discourse markers seriously when they teach writing. Therefore, most students use discourse markers in their writing just following their intuition toward cohesion and coherence. This may lead to the following phenomena:

1. Some students seldom use discourse markers to avoid unpredicted mistakes. S13 is one of the examples. In their articles they employ discourse markers as few as possible. But this makes their writing a bit unnatural.

Subject 13:

*English is a very important language in the world. A large number of people speak it though China population is the largest one. [However,] You must accept the fact. With China's entry into WTO, our country has entered a period of important strategic opportunities. [But sometimes] We never know how to greet foreigners when we meet them. Quite a number of students think that English is a boring subject. **But** we still learn English and make it well.*

How to improve our English? Don't think the English is just a matter of grammar and vocabulary. [Because] Listening, reading, writing and speaking is [also] the key to learn English well. Listening frequently to special programs will help us improve our listening comprehension. [And] You can watch English and American

film to training you hearing. [And] Watch movies also can training you words pronunciation. Reading books, you can recite grammar and increase you vocabulary. It is very useful. When you reading books, you can read it loudly. [I think,] Writing grammar and vocabulary are very important. You should remember the words. [And] Speaking, you must say English daringly every time and everywhere to anybody. I like English very much, but my English is very poor. [For] I can't remember the words.

[But anyway I think] Persistence means victory!

Grammatical mistakes of this article are not corrected except for several obvious slips of pen, because only discourse markers are the focus of my paper. There are only two discourse markers (two underlined **but**s) in S13. If the discourse markers within brackets were added to the original article, S13 would read more naturally and fluently.

2. Most students do use a certain number of discourse markers in their writing, but they are not sure what is the correct way to use them. So some mistakes or inappropriateness occur in their writing. Following are some examples.

Subject 2:

As is known to all, English is the most widely used language in the world. Frankly speaking, English is more and more important. But for me English is not simply important. It gives me confidence and motivation.

Frankly speaking is semantically inappropriate here.

Subject 7:

Firstly, as English relates to our further education, it become a pressure. Secondly, however English is beautiful, □I like Chinese better than English forever.

However is used in a wrong way or a wrong position, and there omits a discourse marker in □.

Subject 14:

To some extent, vocabulary is very important, but on the other hand, we must know other ways of learning English.

...

We also should write more, □we may try to keep diary in English. After all, writing has played an important role in our daily life. Through writing we could express what we thought of and what opinions we own.

But on the other hand is neither semantically nor formally appropriate here. Again, a discourse marker is neglected, and *after all* does not represent a causative relation.

Subject 18:

As we well know, English is the most useful language in the world. When we graduate, how can we live without English?

So I love English very much and I need it. But, how to study it well? This is a question.

It seems unnatural and abrupt to see the *So*, and it would be better to substitute *However* for *But*.

Subject 23:

And I think it is the best way to learn English well. And we must persist in.

And learning English well may be the best thing I can do to improve my life. Because it seems that the people in the world have agreed to use English to talk to each other. Knowing English will let me get a good job. And learning foreign country's life and culture, travel move easily and we can communicate with people wherever we go. So English is an important language, we should learn it well.

The discourse marker *and* occurs too frequently and unnecessarily. It seems that *Because* does not initiate a logic clause which represents cause-and-result relationship.

Subject 30:

Besides, when starting English, we should use our brains, so we may become more flexible.

So is too strong to use here, so it is not used appropriately.

Subject 34:

If you can speak English fluently That is to say, you will not be afraid of finding a job. What's more take me for example, I have learned English for a long time, and I will go on. I have to learn English well if I want to find a good job after I graduate from the collage.

Again, the discourse markers are used inappropriately both semantically and formally.

Subject 36:

Besides English is a beautiful language, which is worth of learning. Some English songs are perfectly sweet, such as American Country Music. There are also a lot of Rock Music songs in English.

Obviously, *Additionally* or *What's more* is more appropriate to take the place of *Besides*.

Conclusion

A good writing is not only grammatical, but also cohesive and coherent. Above analysis tells us that due to lack of discourse markers or misuse of discourse markers the students' articles become less cohesive and less coherent. We can't say discourse markers are decisive for English writing, but we can't deny they have a great effect on the cohesion and coherence of writing. "Discourse markers tell us not only about the linguistic properties (e.g. semantic and pragmatic meanings, source, functions) of a set of frequently used expressions, and the organization of social interactions and situations in which they are used, but also about the cognitive, expressive, social, and textual competence of those who use them. Because the functions of markers are so broad, any and all analyses of markers --- even those focusing on only a relatively narrow aspect of their meaning or a small portion of their uses --- can teach us something about their role in discourse (Schiffrin, 1987: 67)." This paper discusses their use in Chinese students' English writing and their effect on writing in a brief and simple way. Discourse markers function as one

of the cohesive devices between words and sentences. So during English teaching, especially during English writing teaching, discourse markers should be paid attention. They should not be underestimated or ignored.

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Appendix 1

Subjects	Discourse Markers used and Total Words
01	furthermore, at present, well, so, first, second, besides, after all, in a word (9:284)
02	frankly speaking, but, in my opinion, at last (4:144)
03	so, even, and (3:144)
04	I think, as far as I see, and ² , so, but, at first, because, however, gradually, for example, especially (12:280)
05	but ⁵ , and ³ , for example, so, well, then ² , I think ² , besides, after all (17:323)
06	and ⁶ , besides ² , in a word, but ² , in my opinion, maybe ² , also, I think ² , after all, so (19:430)
07	and, but, now ² , firstly, secondly, however, maybe, for (9:119)
08	now, but, firstly, I think ² , secondly, thirdly, so, fourthly, and (10:239)
09	on the one hand, on the other hand, so, but ² , I think, oh, of course (8:221)
10	of course, but ⁵ , and, you know, however, now ² (11:224)
11	now ² , so ² , but ² , first, second, third (9:270)
12	of course, and ² , besides, but ⁵ , I think, now ² , first, second, practically speaking (15:276)
13	but ² (2:225)
14	so, I think ² , but ³ , to some extent, on the other hand (8:396)
15	because, of course, from then on, now, and, maybe, but (7:189)

16	but, so ₂ , I think, and ₄ , sometimes, besides, in a word, now	(12:230)
17	perhaps, but, because, and ₃ , I think, for example, so, in that case, in a word	(11:237)
18	I think, so ₂ , but ₂ , of course, besides	(7:232)
19	now, and, on the other hand, so, even	(5:204)
20	I think ₃ , however, first, second, besides, for example, but, after that, in a word	(11:268)
21	I think ₃ , sometimes, then ₄ , for instance, however, well, and ₃ , but ₂ , of course, first, or, of course, for example, in this way	(22:697)
22	nowadays, and ₂ , but, sometimes, because ₂	(7:229)
23	I think ₃ , but ₂ , nowadays, so ₂ , however, in my opinion, because ₂ , and ₆	(18:372)
24	besides, for example, in a word, but, I think	(5:206)
25	I think, so ₃ , then, but, now, maybe	(8:134)
*26	for, so ₂ , then, to my excited (excitement), but, now, and, in my opinion, in this way, I think ₂	(12:231)
27	I think, because, then, and, so	(5:231)
28	I think, first, then ₂ , you know, so ₂ , at last	(8:199)
29	and ₂ , in my opinion, first of all, to be exact, as a result, second, besides, third, what's more, to draw a conclusion, so	(11:226)
30	and, so ₂ , for example, then, because	(6:229)
31	yes, indeed, nowadays, so ₂ , what is the worse, because, in a word	(8:241)
32	so, I think, but, in my opinion, usually, for example	(6:133)
33	and ₃ , nowadays, maybe, because, that is to say, for example, so ₂ , perhaps	(11:206)
34	I think ₃ , because, but ₄ , now ₃ , then, maybe	(13:366)
35	because ₂ , but ₂ , and, besides, in fact, generally speaking	(8:209)
36	I think ₃ , and ₂ , but ₃ , now, so ₂ , then ₆ , besides, for example, first	(19:266)
37	and ₂ , but ₂ , you see, especially, so, then	(8:203)
38	and ₄ , but, on the other hand, of course, because	(8:212)